

# Raising children in a wealthy family: Values are the foundation

*Start articulating and instilling values when the kids are very young. As they mature, it's important to have direct discussions of wealth and stewardship.*

**By Jeff Savlov**

**R**AISING CHILDREN is generally considered extremely rewarding, incredibly challenging and most often a good mix of the two. Affluent parents face special challenges as they strive to raise productive, unselfish children who have strong character and appreciate their own accomplishments separate from the family “head start.”

While affluence offers security and comfort and can make life easier in many ways, raising children amid wealth can complicate things. Too much personally unearned ease and comfort can be harmful. Self-esteem and determination are born of struggle balanced with successes and, importantly, failures from which to learn and grow. The best advice for parents seeking to manage these challenges is to start early, even giving careful thought to the issues before kids are born. Parents need a path for articulating essential life values and creatively finding fun ways to integrate them into their children's lives.

Many wealthy families believe it's best to wait until high school to begin dealing with these issues. The delay, which is often driven by a focus on money and assets, misses many powerful early opportunities. When the approach is broadened beyond finances to include articulating and instilling values, no age is too young. As kids mature, direct discussions of wealth and stewardship become more appropriate and important. Many parents completely avoid discussions of the family's wealth, and this is one of the biggest pitfalls.

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## **Universal goals of raising children**

Generally speaking, parents look to achieve broad objectives. Parents want children to become more independent as they move from their early years to their teens and into adulthood. While some cultures value children who remain physically and emotionally close to parents, others accept, and may even value, less emotional connection and more geographic distance. At both ends of the continuum, a basic degree of increasing independence over time is valued.

Parents want children who can form healthy, stable relationships with friends, establish loving partnerships and be socially successful in work environments. Parents want children to develop motivation—to pursue and achieve mastery and satisfaction in whatever productive pursuit the child might choose. Parents also hope for healthy character formation, which includes being trustworthy, respectful, honest and fair in dealing with others.

## **The absolute importance of values in raising children**

Values are foundational principles; they inform a person's choices and behavior and are particularly helpful when one must face challenges and make difficult decisions. Values exist in all spheres of our lives; see the next page for an extensive list and an exercise related to children and values. Extensive resources (books, exercises, websites) are available for affluent families looking to articulate and clarify values and teach them to their children. These resources also suggest ways to seamlessly integrate values into daily family activities. With values, as with most things in life, actions speak louder than words.

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Couples in families of privilege would do well to spend time before having children discussing values and the specific ways they relate to life. Parents and parents-to-be should define areas of agreement and difference. When holding differing perspectives, they should find common ground and present a united front to their children on the most important values. It is essential for parents to lay the foundation of what they most value in life and impart this to their children.

Huge opportunities exist for parents to examine and better understand their own feelings about money, material possessions and their identities as “wealthy”; these will greatly affect approaches to parenting. Along these lines, some children grow up in wealthier circumstances than their parents did, depending on the timing of the wealth creation/growth. Parents must understand the circumstances of their own childhoods, learn about the different needs of their children and make adjustments. This is another of the great opportunities for enlightened parenting amid wealth.

### Start young – very young

As couples with young children (or before having children) begin to clarify values, they should be aware that where one lives plays an important role. Communities have values cultures that can reinforce or undermine family values. In some places, parents typically lavish young kids with expensive toys, indulge their freshly licensed teens with new cars, give limitless spending money and rarely expect their kids to get a job. Such parents might want to make their wealth very visible and may not discipline their kids, who as a result often develop an unhealthy sense of entitlement. By contrast, in other communities parents may expect kids to walk or ride bikes rather than drive their own cars. If parents buy a car for their child, it might be a used car, and the child might be expected to contribute a portion of the cost. In such a community, kids of all ages generally show respect. It is important when deciding where to live to choose a community in which the general values support your own, if you have the flexibility to choose.

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## Creatively Instilling Values in Children

**Below is a list** of potential family values, including a “wild card” enabling you to add your own. As an exercise, pick two or three high-priority values you would like to transmit to your children and come up with several specific ways you might go about incorporating them into a child’s life. Be creative and have fun with it.

For example, if the values selected are “nature/environment” and “health & fitness”:

- Prepare a garden as a family and plant vegetables. Teach children to care for the plants as they grow. Explain that the veggies are a source of vitamins that make muscles strong.

- Go on hikes as a family and have a picnic featuring veggies grown in your garden. Learn about healthy foods that are safe to pick and eat in the wild and seek them out together. Camp overnight in the woods; teach kids to gather firewood and safely start and manage a fire.

- Take long walks in your neighborhood and carry a trash bag so you can collect trash you see along the way and bring it home to properly dispose of it. If some of it is recyclable, teach kids about recycling and the benefits of reducing landfill waste.

**Community:** Meaningful connection to a group of people.

**Compassion:** Consciousness of, sympathy toward and a desire to help others.

**Cooperation:** Working or acting together for a common purpose or benefit; joint action.

**Courage:** The ability and willingness to stand up in the face of danger or fear.

**Creativity:** Ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns and relationships.

**Education:** Acquiring knowledge.

**Effectiveness:** Being able to successfully produce a desired or intended result.

**Family:** Supporting and spending time with loved ones.

**Financial Success:** Making money.

**Freedom:** The power and ability to determine action; not being controlled by external factors.

**Friendship:** Forming and sustaining harmonious, close, mutual and trustworthy relationships.

**Health & Fitness:** Exercising, staying active and fit, eating well.

**Helping:** Giving assistance and support.

**Independence:** Freedom from the control or influence of others; not needing the support of others.

**Integrity:** Honesty; acting in line with your deeply held values.

**Justice:** The pursuit of what is fair and moral.

**Leadership:** Having a vision and inspiring others to work toward it.

**Loyalty:** Adherence and devotion to your commitments and obligations.

**Nature/Environment:** Respecting and preserving the physical world and everything in it that is not made by people.

**Personal Growth:** Pursuing activities that promote self-awareness, spirituality, identity or development of one’s talents or potential.

**Pleasure:** Pursuing enjoyment, satisfaction and delight.

**Power:** The ability to act autonomously, succeed in your endeavors and effect change.

**Recognition:** Receiving praise or credit for your efforts.

**Responsibility:** Doing what is required, expected and right.

**Risk:** Willingness to fail in order to grow.

**Stability:** Appreciating consistency and preferring to avoid sudden change.

**Tolerance:** Respecting others, particularly when they are different from you.

**Tradition:** Preserving or honoring beliefs or customs shared across generations.

**‘Wild Card’:** *Insert your own value.*

**Work Satisfaction:** Finding pleasure in work.

While most experts agree that we develop aspects of our thinking and personality throughout our lifetimes, it is widely recognized that it is much easier to instill fundamental values early in life, since many aspects of a young child’s understanding of the world are developed before kindergarten. The later we wait, the harder it is to change undesired values. Efforts to encourage change later on can breed anger and resistance.

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However, the goal should not be to completely mold those little people exactly as we wish, as this robs them of their spontaneity and creativity to find their own way and pursue personal interests and passions. It is essential to set the proper conditions for them to create their own paths.

Some fundamentals can be modeled and taught when a child is a year old or even slightly earlier. The importance of “please,” “thank you,” “I’m sorry” and the “Golden Sippy Cup Rule” (see page 95) cannot be overestimated.

When parents insist their children say “please” when asking for something, they are teaching them to be

respectful of others, and that the child is not the center of the world. We all exist as part of a larger community whose members are likely to be kind and helpful when treated with respect and courtesy. A “thank you” completes the cycle by showing gratitude, and acknowledging others are not required to help but do so voluntarily. Instilling the “please” and “thank you” habit should begin as soon as a child gains early language skills. This is a powerful way to head off a sense of entitlement. Making the use of these terms automatic requires consistent effort by the parents, extended family and community members.

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## ‘Affluenza’: A Complex Term

The term “affluenza” is a combination of the words “affluence” and “influenza.” It refers to the outcome of a process by which children in wealthy families can potentially (not always, by any means) be sheltered in a world of privilege. These young people lack discipline and have been robbed of the ability to function responsibly and with conscience.

A distinction should be made between children and families who fit the “affluenza” description and children who were successfully raised through healthy parenting that took into account and proactively managed the challenges and opportunities of wealth.

“Affluenza” was never officially classified as a disease—and rightfully so. The lack of attentive and values-based parenting that causes character difficulties in children is not limited by socioeconomic factors; it negatively affects people at all social and economic levels. The term was originally coined to describe and focus on the very real challenges wealthy families face raising emotionally healthy, motivated children in a context of tremendous resources and access to opportunity. However, over time the term has gained notoriety, as it has been used in the legal system to garner special consideration for the irresponsible behavior of offspring in some wealthy families.

Ironically, the term “affluenza” has been used to shield young people from precisely the kinds of consequences that are necessary to prevent the “condition” in the first place, as well as to justify unfair levels of leniency when courts are involved. Lack of accountability causes “affluenza,” then the concept of “affluenza” itself is used to avoid accountability.

In 2013, a 16-year-old named Ethan Couch killed four people and permanently disabled another while driving drunk. A judge sen-

tenced him to 10 years of probation—no jail time. Although Couch was tried as a juvenile, prosecutors had sought 20 years in prison. Couch’s defense attorneys argued that he was a victim of “affluenza.” A psychologist testified that because Couch was brought up in a wealthy family, he had been spoiled and was never held accountable by indulgent parents; therefore, he could not distinguish right from wrong and should not be held personally responsible. (Subsequently, Couch was sentenced to nearly two years in jail after fleeing the country with his mother as prosecutors investigated whether he had violated his probation. His mother was also indicted for her role in helping him leave the country.)

In 2016, Stanford University swimmer Brock Turner received an extremely controversial sentence of six months in jail for sexual assault of an unconscious woman. Turner’s father read a letter in court during his son’s sentencing that said, “His life will never be the one that he dreamed about and worked so hard to achieve. That is a steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action out of his 20 plus years of life.” One must assume his victim paid a “steep price” as well. Media referred to “affluenza” in this situation to explain the skewed logic of the father’s letter and the judge’s sentence. Many pundits wrote and spoke about the possibility that if Turner had been poor (or poor and a member of a minority group) a longer sentence would have been extremely likely.

There is hypocrisy related to the concept of “affluenza.” Some affluent parents cause bad behavior in their children by failing to impose active discipline and to teach kids that their actions have consequences. Defense attorneys invoke “affluenza” to avoid penalties

for their clients, while judges (and society at large) consciously or unwittingly minimize serious infractions of the social contract. Social inequality abounds; the same logic does not apply to people from poor and minority backgrounds who certainly have myriad pressures affecting their choices. Members of poor and minority populations are incarcerated without any “illness” absolving them of guilt, even though they have suffered from poor parenting and extreme financial forces.

The term “affluenza,” while originally coined to describe a real challenge of wealthy families, worthy of attention, has become confusing at best and more often unjust and dangerous. The term misleadingly connotes an illness model, suggesting a random process that can infect and sicken like the “flu.” In reality, the power of enlightened and values-based parenting amidst wealth is the effective inoculation against the trappings of wealth gone awry.

“Affluenza” has been used to avoid formal punishment for illegal behavior among people from wealthy families or simply to refer to the negative character consequences of growing up in wealth without proper parenting. However, the focus on and use of the term “affluenza” has diverted society from the true and necessary responsibilities wealthy (and all) families need to take. Attention should instead be placed on enlightened parenting wherein the special challenges of family wealth can be identified and addressed. Parents should, of course, proudly share the family’s many success stories, too. And these stories can be told in ways that highlight wonderful life lessons. The manipulative use of the term “affluenza” impedes the good work being done to these ends by many thoughtful, financially fortunate families.

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Teaching children to apologize—to say, “I’m sorry”—helps them learn that their behavior has an effect on others, and that they can hurt others’ feelings. When a person falls short in dealing with others, there is work to be done: acknowledging the hurtful behavior, accepting responsibility through a sincere “I’m sorry” and making genuine efforts to not repeat the behavior.

Last, the “Golden Sippy Cup Rule” dictates that any child who can walk and hold a cup should be expected to carry it to the sink or dishwasher when it’s empty. This teaches children the expectation to contribute and put effort toward taking care of themselves. This, too, is a good early preventive measure against unhealthy entitlement.

### **Daily integration of values**

Parents should creatively seek out opportunities to integrate values into daily behavior. For example, if education is valued and reading deemed important, parents should be seen reading and should read to their kids books they enjoy. If self-sufficiency is valued, young kids can be instructed to put their dirty clothes in the clothes hamper and be expected to help carry at least some of them to the washing machine. If healthy eating is valued, parents might serve a healthy food such as broccoli at every meal and encourage their children to try it even if the kids do not initially like it. (It’s all in the presentation: Parents can pretend the broccoli is a small tree and the child is a giant swooping down and gobbling it up with his or her teeth. Tell kids the more broccoli the monster eats, the bigger its muscles become. Be silly and playful, and make it fun.) If treating others with respect is desired, parents should supervise play dates, not as hovering helicopter parents but with enough involvement to catch poor behavior, intervene and teach.

In our family, my wife and I wanted to instill in our sons a sense of importance around doing nice and helpful things for others without any special reason and regardless of their age, gender or ability. One example was holding doors open for anyone near us. We made it almost a competitive sport (who could get to the door first and hold it). People really appreciate a door being held, particularly by a young kid. Traditionally, this might have been taught as “hold doors open for women or old folks,” but our personal values were such that we wanted something more universal. Daily integration of values can be creative and fun. While it can also bring about some amount of tension, disobedience and annoyed eye-rolling, the effort is worth the payoff.

### **Elementary and middle-school years**

Use the elementary and middle-school years to tell lots of stories to your children to articulate values. Invite older family members to join in; let them speak of the hardships the family endured and how they were handled and share the successes and related challenges. If your family has or had an operating business, tell how it was started, the risks taken and tough times along the way. Stories of failure that led to eventual successes are amazingly powerful

because they teach perseverance and hard work. They normalize failures that, mixed with successes, are essential for developing self-esteem. Not all stories need a deep moral purpose. Sometimes simply sharing your “self” through a story (about a challenge at work or with a friend, something you are struggling to learn or something you witnessed that made you laugh really hard) is incredibly healthy and strengthens bonds.

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## **Parents need a path for articulating essential life values and creatively finding fun ways to integrate them into their children’s lives.**

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A child who is given too much without struggle can become spoiled. A child experiencing too many failures will lose motivation and any hope of achieving. Parents should not only learn and tell family stories that explain the balance between hard work and success, but also put it into practice by establishing rigorous expectations for children. When sharing these stories at developmentally appropriate levels, parents need not focus on the monetary aspects of success; doing so risks idealizing money before values. Instead, focus on examples of generosity, determination, education, standing up for one’s beliefs, fighting ignorance and treating others well.

Discussions of wealth should not be avoided either; doing so risks stigmatizing money and financial success. Parents must be mindful of the context of the conversation and relate the wealth back to the family values. Avoiding conversations about money and material wealth does not prevent harm; in fact, it usually causes harm.

It is also important during these years to acquaint children with money and how it works. Giving children an allowance provides a great opportunity to teach about the balance of saving, spending and giving. Some parents choose to match money saved in order to encourage saving. If a family observes a religious or cultural tradition of gift giving, a great opportunity presents itself to teach that some people have less and to suggest that children donate some of their gifts to organizations that help those people. This helps children understand how fortunate they are, and encourages them to make a positive impact on the world.

When it comes to privileges, it is important that children have “skin in the game.” For example, young children with cell phones can be asked to pay toward the cost of the phone or toward a data plan. This teaches the reality that material possessions must be paid for and that children are expected to contribute. Consider setting up checking and savings accounts for children so they can pay their part each month by writing a check or paying online (which integrates technology into their money-skills repertoire).

Parents need to clarify their expectations; teaching why their values are important goes a long way. Be ready for some pushback, especially if friends' parents do not have similar expectations. While potentially challenging, there is no easy way around this. Ultimately, parents should hold their ground, knowing they are doing the right thing.

During elementary and middle school years, children observe their parents' behavior very closely. It is important to "walk the walk," and be sure your behavior matches the values you espouse.

For example, when something breaks, do you quickly suggest it is not a problem and another will be easily purchased? Or do you discuss the cost involved and try to repair it with your child's assistance? If the child's irresponsible behavior caused the breakage, should the child contribute to the cost of a replacement?

As parents, do you paint the house or work in the garden? If both parents have jobs and time constraints prevent you from performing these tasks, there is an opportunity to explain to children that others have been hired for these tasks to give the family more time to spend together because the parents work hard. You could also take on small painting or gardening projects together as a family.

Does busy life lead to eating out a lot and little cooking and eating together? Maybe one night per week everyone can commit to being home for dinner, exploring meal options and preparing the meal together.

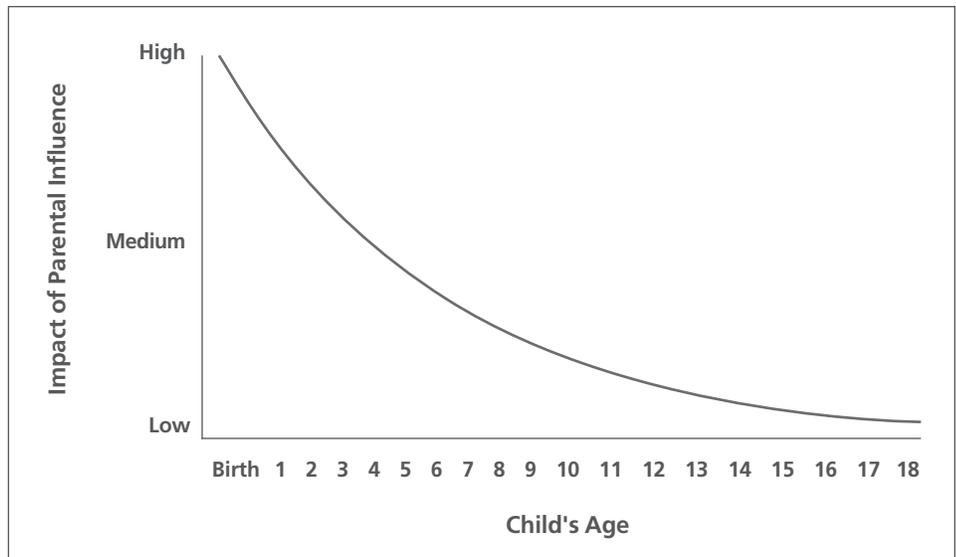
Each of these examples is one of many opportunities to live by (or undermine) your values.

Keep in mind how powerful simple experiences are: camping in tents, swimming in a lake or ocean, hiking in a park and watching movies together with popcorn while cuddling together in the family living room. These simple experiences provide family togetherness and fun without the need for much money.

## High school years

Like it or not, most children rebel to some degree during their high school years. Parents must be patient, creative and flexible when engaging young adult children in deeper levels of conversation about the importance of the family values. They need to allow teenagers to disagree, explain themselves and suggest new values for the family to consider. Children may adopt values they buy into independent of the family as a way of finding their own path; this is fine as long as they are making healthy choices.

While demonstrating flexibility and openness around family values, parents must also clarify their firm expecta-



Parents generally have much greater influence when children are very young. Parental involvement is crucial through teen years and beyond; however, the opportunities for influencing values and behavior when children are young cannot be overstated.

tions. For example, before a teen is able to drive, parents can spell out policies about the kid's access to the family car, contributing to car insurance or purchasing his or her own car.

Expecting a child in a wealthy family to work can be particularly productive, even when the teen complains that "my friend's parents do not make their kids do this." Discuss the importance of work. Consider funding a well-developed business plan your teen comes up with to encourage entrepreneurship. The child's venture can be a simple one, like weeding gardens or shoveling snow, or a much more sophisticated endeavor. Parents can fund the basic tools needed; the child can get customers, do the work and hire/pay other teens. Let the child choose to repay the initial investment over time or give a percentage of the profits to the parents. This focuses the teen on thinking through risk-reward scenarios and familiarizes him or her with the expectations of investors (even when they are family).

If things have gone well to this point, parents should be able to speak more openly about the family's wealth, although this depends on each child's temperament and maturity. Discuss the distinction between needs and wants and share your views about how to manage wants in a consumer-driven world. Ask teens what they think their parents worry about, given that the family has more money than necessary for the basics of food, clothing and a place to live. Solicit their ideas about the harm and benefits of inheriting money. Many books and various experts are available to help open up this family conversation in creative and educational ways.

Ultimately, parenting presents joys and challenges. Although wealth adds a layer of complexity, this can be managed, to the benefit of the family and even the wider world. Start early, clarify essential values and develop fun and creative ways to integrate the family values into family life. **FB**